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The Strange Fruit of 9/11

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Title: The Strange Fruit of 9/11

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Abstract: The author discusses the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks and the larger psychological narrative and context of the attacks. Stoicism is considered as a viable response.

Strange Fruit is a poem written by Abel Meeropol. It employs the metaphor of fruit hanging from a tree for the dead bodies of lynched black men just hanged. "Southern trees bear strange fruit, Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." Meeropol wrote music to the lyrics, and the poem, now song, was sung at political demonstrations and at commercial entertainment venues. Billie Holliday made it part of her act—often closing her shows, the fruits of her own lynched soul. "Pastoral scene of the gallant South, The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth, Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh, Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!" Beyond Holliday, Strange Fruit has been performed by acts as diverse as Nina Simone, the Cocteau Twins, and Sting. "Here is fruit for the crows to pluck, For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck, For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop, Here is a strange and bitter crop."

Is 9/11 a strange fruit? The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 arguably comprised the murder of people for who they were not killed for what they did, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, if not swinging in the Southern breeze then jumping from the Towers and falling through the Southern New York City skies with bulging eyes and twisted mouth, with burning flesh, a strange and bitter crop. Terrorists and lynchers both believed their victims deserved what they got. They had it coming. The reaction to both the lynchings and the terrorist attacks ran and run the gamut from joy to horror to anger to indifference to cynical schadenfreude.

But 9/11 is not the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks but an ongoing narrative that is still being acted out and written by the attacks' very targets—we the people. And we are still creating this narrative, but, too often, in a manner exemplifying self-injurious behavior. In fact, it is as if those under the threat of being lynched are helping and encouraging and even creating would-be lynchers.

How is this? We continue to give speeches about 9/11, make and exhibit films, create and engage in social rituals of mourning and remembrance. We avow pain and anguish. We lift up 9/11 to the heavens as something holy, sacred, and hallowed that we will never forget. We keep increasing the magnitude of its consequences by changing in many ways the structure of our government, daily political discourse, social interaction, the very way we live. By doing all of this, we do the work of the terrorists. We give them power. We spread the glory of their deeds far and wide. We aver our fear. We facilitate the recruiting of others throughout the world who through the quest for a call to glory, compensation for feelings of inferiority, or just kicks will desire to execute or support the execution of further violence. In the parlance of early 1970s blaxploitation films. We're riling up more people to stick it to the Man. A man that's squealing and ready to squeal like a pig for the slightest provocation. And they're thinking we're the Man, whether we are or not.

There are many explanations for this ongoing self-injurious behavior, behavior which includes the flagellation and mutilation of our own minds and souls. A significant one is that too many United States

citizens may be victims of past ideological, political, cultural, and material success—Manifest Destiny, the American Century, and all that. The result for too many may be a too low tolerance for things not going right. The too low tolerance leading to an emotional overreaction flooding cognitive analysis, the Dionysian overcoming the Apollonian, the subversion of proaction before and reaction to what comes next. Not realizing that the ultimate target of terrorism is most often not the body count and destruction but the psychological aftermath. Not realizing that terrorism is psychological rape and we're just asking for it.

The appropriate counterterrorist aftermath to decrease the frequency of terrorist motives and acts is one of stoicism as a way of life. A stoicism that is founded on believing that emotion may be an indicator of false judgment and that those who emote uncontrollably not only may be slaves of passion but are enslaved through terrorism. That virtue, courage, justice, prudence, and moderation are sufficient for happiness and that with these there can be no misfortune. And that both a Nietzschean will to power and a true Islamic jihad are not external quests to control others but life battles within each of us.

Be careful of the term moderation. This is not a stance of passivity, tuning the other cheek, or half measures. Stoicism recognizes that we live in a social world and that action often is the correct response to a good or an evil—the appropriate movement of the soul towards an object. And moderation may involve a very, very intense series of actions in specific, extreme contexts. It may well be that the focused and ruthlessly efficient response to an evil may be a suitable take on stoicism's core of living in agreement with nature. For stoic happiness is acting in agreement with nature, doing what it falls to one to do, regardless of always getting what one might desire through emotion or anything else.

And emotions are not to be jettisoned. They can be profitably examined to support analysis of a challenge and responses to it even as they remain a threat to good judgment. All this is the case in extreme hypoxic environments of adventurers as much as those with the threat of terrorist violence as salient.

Strange Fruit's poet Abel Meeropol later adopted the two sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Julius and Ethel were convicted of espionage against the United States and executed in 1953. They stole secrets. Has 9/11 stolen our soul?

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